

# Teaching Historical Skills through JSTOR: An Online Research Project for Survey Courses

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AS A NEW PH.D. preparing for my first university appointment in June 2006, I began constructing World History I and II surveys for which my graduate training left me feeling underprepared. Among the myriad challenges, I sought to create a research assignment for general education students that would address a diverse range of backgrounds and learning needs, with a particular concern for the considerable number of underprivileged students who were first-in-family to college. It needed to be doable using a library with a modest collection, and brief enough that I might grade from 100 to 160 of them each semester. Ideally, it also would require critical reading skills, allow me to learn from my students, meaningfully integrate technology, and be as plagiarism-proofed as possible. The result, an assignment asking students to find and review a scholarly article from the JSTOR academic journal database, suggests many of the challenges and opportunities associated with Internet-based assignments.

## **Assignment Description**

I originally conceived the JSTOR article review as a twenty-first-century, bite-sized version of the standard book review, where students are invited to learn in greater detail about the history of any topic of interest

that falls under the aegis of the particular survey course, then evaluate the merits of the author's work. Given instructions for getting to and searching JSTOR, they were to write a five-page paper summarizing the content and critically evaluate the author's work, turning in a copy of their selected articles along with their reviews.

In their papers, students expressed enthusiasm, even empowerment at mastering searches through JSTOR and for discovering that there are histories for everything from sub-Saharan sports to Swiss sex. But I also discovered that my students typically did not enter college knowing how to make a historical argument or how that distinguishes the discipline from others. They often did not recognize such arguments, being more familiar instead with philosophical arguments of what is morally right or wrong, of what ought to be, or of what society or policy works best. Student papers from that first semester generally repackaged historical content gleaned from their articles in a manner that may or may not have demonstrated comprehension of the content. I also saw little attempt and less success at identifying a thesis, sources used to advance the thesis, or questions raised by the article.

These observations compelled further reflection about what the assignment needed to accomplish and how better to integrate it into my course. I altered the purpose of lectures, class discussions, and the JSTOR assignment in hopes of bringing greater emphasis to the teaching of what historians do, as opposed to the teaching of discrete units of historical content.<sup>1</sup> Each course element moved away from accumulating trivia of varying degrees of importance, and toward learning how to use evidence to make historical arguments and to evaluate the historical arguments made by others. Eventually, the JSTOR article review evolved to function only secondarily as a research or review exercise. Instead, I started presenting it as their chance to examine what it means to do history, to use evidence in order to build an historical argument, and to integrate that work with the skills taught in lecture and discussion. This shift is evident in the near tripling in length of the JSTOR assignment sheet, which has evolved into a document that now serves as much as an assigned reading that introduces students to historical argumentation as it does their semester's project.<sup>2</sup>

### **Integration into Classroom**

As I better apprehended what I wanted my students' scholarly article reviews to accomplish, it altered the purpose and delivery of my lectures, graded class discussion days, and other class assignments. Increasingly, I seek to lecture and create discussion days that simulate for students the

same process of constructing and presenting a historical argument that they will encounter as they begin to search for, read, and critique their JSTOR articles.<sup>3</sup> An early lecture in World History I, for instance, begins with the explanation that the purpose of the day's lecture is to advance the historical argument that rivers were a crucial factor in the rise of civilizations. I tell students that what they see in lecture is my attempt to model the same historical process of asking a question, and coming to a thesis supported by evidence that they will be asked to do in their class discussions, and that their JSTOR article review is their chance to grade another historian's attempt to do the same.<sup>4</sup>

This introduction to the fundamentals of historical research and argumentation has greatly helped my ability to teach historical controversy. I can emphasize, for instance, that, just as my students are drawing different conclusions from the primary sources assigned for their class discussions, a JSTOR search for articles on Columbus's voyages will turn up countless of different sorts of evidence to draw different sorts of conclusions. This approach helps me destabilize the common student assumption that the professor's lectures are infallible, and lets students grapple with and evaluate historical uncertainty and debate.

### **Success in Assignment**

Overall, I consider the development of the JSTOR article review assignment a success in introducing students to the craft of history, especially evaluating evidence and arguments and appreciating the role of complexity and controversy in historical work by grappling with it up close. It also has brought secondary benefits in that most students seem able to find articles on topics of personal interest, and learn skills like reading footnotes, and the assignment has proven to be highly resilient to plagiarism.

In offering students an opportunity to demonstrate knowledge of additional historical content, the assignment is a resounding success. In the three years that I have assigned the JSTOR article review in all of my survey classes—World History I and II, and American Nation I and II—it has without exception resulted in the highest average grade among my assignments.

More important, students are learning and demonstrating academic and historical skills fundamental to academic success. The articles students select generally are the most advanced pieces of writing they encounter in my survey courses. While the most frequent criticism students levy against articles is that they include too many complex words, sentences, and poor organization, this is almost always followed by the complaint, "so I had

to read and re-read paragraphs several times.” That is an admission that I never hear regarding the textbook and rarely for primary sources.<sup>5</sup>

A similar phenomenon happens with footnotes. My instructions on the assignment sheet very specifically ask students to identify the types of sources being used by the author, to consider whether or not those sources are appropriate and sufficient, and to suggest what additional sources might be useful. I omit any mention about reading footnotes, but many of my stronger students rest their evaluation of the author’s expertise and persuasiveness on an examination of the footnotes.

Requiring students to turn in a copy of the article they review has furthered my appreciation for how critically my students are reading their material. Although I originally made this a requirement in order to deter plagiarism, I have discovered that looking at my students’ marginalia allows me a closer inspection of how well students are critically engaging with the article, looking for arguments and evidence, and finding ideas in their articles that inspired new questions. While some articles show no markings, most show underlining, and at least half show students adding commentary, questions, disagreements, and affirmations in the margins. This chance to peer behind the finished product and inspect the thought process behind it is not otherwise readily available to me in my survey courses, and is due to the choice of JSTOR as the location for research. I could not practically have over 100 students turn in the books from which they build their book reviews, nor could I supervise that many traditional research projects. Leafing through printed-out academic articles to check marginalia, however, is a useful investment of time as I grade.

Most important, at least some articles introduce students to the idea of historical controversy in a level of detail that cannot be done in class. As a historian of science by training, I go into considerable depth in my World History II and American Nation II courses about America’s construction of, decision to use, and consequences from atomic weapons. I cannot begin, however, to mine the depths of historical and historiographic controversy surrounding the issue, so it has pleased me to find that “Atomic bomb” is one of the most popular searches among my students, which in turn leads several to Martin Sherwin’s “Hiroshima as Politics and History.” The article in the *Journal of American History* examines the controversy that flared around the Smithsonian’s depiction of the fiftieth anniversary of the bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, and introduces students to a very public and relatively recent historical controversy on a topic of considerable interest to students. Another *JAH* article, “Carlo Tresca and the Sacco-Vanzetti Case,” by Nunzio Pernicone, similarly has introduced some American Nation II students to degrees of nuance, uncertainty, and interpretation surrounding the infamous case that could

not be done in class and likely would not come out from a more conventional student-generated research paper into the case.

As an assignment intended in part to introduce survey students to online academic resources, the JSTOR assignment boasts a couple of advantages unique to its online format. For the moment at least, it is as about as immune to plagiarizing as an assignment will get. A conventional historical book review or research paper can be found from almost limitless sources; I have narrowed the pool of reviewable options to an immense, but ultimately well-defined and self-contained set that is as transparent to me as to my students. I know exactly where they are searching for their content, and I know that, unlike with Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* or Plato's *Republic*, no one outside of my classroom has ever before bothered writing a review of Tom Terrill, Edmond Ewing, and Pamela White's "Eager Hands: Labor for Southern Textiles, 1850-1860," in the *Journal of Economic History*. The student who turned in an undocumented report on the Freedom Riders received a zero for not following the directions and finding a scholarly article from JSTOR to review, without me having to try to track down the original author of his report.

An additional benefit unique to JSTOR as an online resource is that it introduces students to an unexplored area of the Internet containing a wealth of information that, they report, speaks to their interests and that they likely would not find in the physical collection in our library. Although my university's subscription to one of the more limited versions of JSTOR and the articles' varying levels of appropriateness for undergraduate use each diminish the likelihood that students will find articles of great personal interest, military history always is a popular choice, as are histories of sport and of Christianity. Most of my students have not previously been taught the first word about African civilizations, or of the different historical experiences of slavery, and use lectures and readings as the basis for searches into the history of navigation, Islam, slavery, farming, and colonialism in Africa as well as among African descendants in the Americas. Stephanie Camp's "The Pleasures of Resistance: Enslaved Women and Body Politics in the Plantation South, 1830-1861" received a particularly strong evaluation by a student in my American Nation I course, for instance, as have Wyatt Jeltz's "The Relations of Negroes and Choctaw and Chickasaw Indians" from the *Journal of Negro History* and Chester Starr's "An Overdose of Slavery" from the *Journal of Economic History*.

These choices of topics probably are unsurprising, but I also find my students using JSTOR to search for topics that still carry some sense of the taboo in the high school cultures from which many of them come.

Witchcraft, birth control, and homosexuality all are popular subjects for article reviews, and JSTOR produces several good options when students enter those phrases as searches. I have been especially impressed by a student's review of Andrea Tone's "Black Market Birth Control: Contraceptive Entrepreneurship and Criminality in the Gilded Age," which showed both stronger evaluation of the source material Tone used and better connections back to my American Nation II course than demonstrated in the review of Tone's article available for sale at [www.academon.com](http://www.academon.com). My favorite recent story involves a student who had not found much success in college and came to my office for help on searching for an article. Explaining to him that everything has a history behind it, and that just about everything has a historian who has written about it, the student replied, "so I could do a search on pornography?" He did not expect my answer of "yes" and subsequent explanation why.

But the deepest impression this assignment has made upon me comes from that first semester's trial run, teaching World History I. A student who spent the entire semester appearing to be in a heavily medicated or sedated haze and seemingly set on a clear course towards failing turned in a review of Thomas Brickhouse and Nicholas Smith's "The Origin of Socrates' Mission" from the *Journal of the History of Ideas* that showed an engagement with Socrates' philosophy and trial, Plato's credibility as a witness to the events, and the authors' interpretation of the matter strong enough to boost him to a passing grade. It also offered me some personal insight into the student I had marked as the greatest enigma that first semester. Not unimportantly, given my relative inexperience as a teacher of World History courses, the JSTOR assignment also let me turn a weakness into an advantage, as I advertised the numerous places in lecture and class discussion where we raise issues for which students can find an article, review it, become more of an expert on some niche of history than I am, and teach me historical content for use in future classes.

### **Limitations**

For the first few semesters that I gave this assignment, students would forget or not notice my instructions to limit their searches to articles as opposed to reviews in the history section of JSTOR. They frequently found articles of interest from sources like the *American Journal of Sociology* or selected for their articles four-page literature reviews instead of a twenty-page article. The need to correct this problem became an opportunity to further introduce college freshmen to the historical craft. In the step-by-step process where I take students through finding JSTOR and setting up a search, I now explain the assignment's restriction to historical articles

by reminding students how a historian would ask different questions about the Enlightenment than a sociologist or philosopher would. I similarly use the requirement that they search for articles, not book reviews, to explain how a book review or historiographic review differs from primary source-based research. Those precautions notwithstanding, I have found it useful to require a mini-assignment where students submit to me the full citation and a brief abstract of the article they intend to review, one month in advance of the due date. Even so, students frequently find interesting articles from *American Quarterly*, a journal that, while located in the history section of JSTOR, features sociological and cultural studies papers that other teachers may or may not consider to be appropriately historical for their history courses. Lengthier historiographic reviews inappropriate for the assignment often turn up in JSTOR search results even when the parameters have been set to exclude book reviews. And no matter how frequent and clear the warnings, students still will forget to limit their searches to history, and try to review articles from other disciplines.

My greatest initial worry about the assignment was in its appropriateness for survey-level history students. Would they be both able and willing to work their way through an academic article of the sort that I am used to assigning in thematic upper-level courses or reading in graduate school? Happily, I have had fewer problems with students being unable to comprehend what they were reading than I feared; on their own or with guidance from me, students are able to identify and dismiss articles beyond their comprehension and find ones suitable for college freshmen. *The Journal of African American History* and its predecessor, *The Journal of Negro History*, as well as *The Journal of Military History* and the *Journal of Southern History* all consistently get praise from my students for publishing clearly written articles. The *Journal of the History of Ideas* and the *William and Mary Quarterly* also seem to produce an inordinate number of articles that my stronger students enjoy exploring.

On in-class essay exams, the majority of my students do not include identifiable thesis sentences.<sup>6</sup> This is perhaps the most notable limitation in their ability to review JSTOR historical articles; C papers and a few B papers will review and critique an author's work without identifying the author's central argument or evaluating how well the evidence supports that argument. Less frequently, I still see students confusing an author's lack of a moral judgment on a topic with a lack of an historical argument. Students will say that the author did not clearly state her opinion on, say, slavery or Nazism, unaware of the historical argument the author is making concerning Nazism. These limitations notwithstanding, I am pleased with both my students' ability to sift JSTOR for appropriate, interesting, challenging articles and to engage meaningfully with their contents.

### Areas for Future Growth

As JSTOR continues to expand its collection, I anticipate greater challenges in monitoring students' selection of workable articles, but also perhaps a new source of opportunity. Our lower-level subscription to JSTOR until recently did not contain any of the primary source collections available at JSTOR like the *Philosophical Transactions of the Royal Society*, allowing me to avoid the headache trying to make sure that all my survey students were selecting secondary literature for their reviews and leaving primary source analysis for our in-class discussion assignments. Recently, my university's JSTOR subscription has added a series of pamphlets from nineteenth-century England, but JSTOR happily distinguishes its pamphlet collection from articles, reviews, and editorials, so that students who follow the instructions and check the box to return only results from articles can be confident they are dealing with secondary literature.

Especially at schools lacking a substantial archival collection and not in close proximity to one, the digitizing of historical media has been a great boon, and the addition of the pamphlet collection leaves me considering the possibility of conducting a second online research assignment oriented around primary sources.<sup>7</sup> Were I to teach a course on the history of the British empire, my students would have material for a respectable primary source-based research paper at their fingertips in JSTOR. In one of my own specialties, Gilded Age and Progressive Era American reform movements, the entire proceedings of The National Conference of Charities and Correction was digitized by the University of Michigan, put online, and made word-searchable for free. I envision a course not far from now where I replace my primary source reader with a series of assignments asking students to select their own set of topic-appropriate primary sources from digitized online resources.

More immediate, the integration between in-class work and the JSTOR assignment is limited to my use of class lectures and discussions to mold students' thinking about their papers. The most pressing challenge is to make this integration a two-way street, and find ways to better invite students' research back into the classroom. One possibility I have considered is moving up the date by which students must select an article for review, organizing their papers by topics, then offering interested students the chance to have part of their paper grade or in-class discussion grade come from discussing their article reviews in class at the relevant lecture or discussion day. For instance, I might find that three students in a class plan on reviewing articles related to the Columbian Exchange, and will reserve ten minutes at the end of the relevant lecture for the two

students who want to summarize their reviews. I might similarly turn the final discussion of a World History II course over to all those students who selected article reviews concerning post-World War II topics. Any of a variety of incentives could be used to encourage this, from allowing it to replace a lower grade from a previous discussion or short paper, to reducing the writing requirements on the article review, or simply offering extra credit.

JSTOR has introduced survey students to the more extensive historical content and sophisticated historical analysis that I might expect from more conventional research papers or book reviews, in a format that is amenable to faculty with heavy teaching loads. It furthermore offers a high level of certainty that students will be obligated to do their own work, will find material more likely to be of greater merit than sifting through library shelves for random sources, and will find material of personal interest to them.

## Notes

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1. Sam Wineburg, *Historical Thinking and Other Unnatural Acts: Charting the Future of Teaching the Past* (Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press, 2001).
2. Todd Estes, "Constructing the Syllabus: Devising a Framework for Helping Students Learn to Think Like Historians," *The History Teacher* 40, no. 2 (February 2007): 183-201.
3. D. Antonio Cantu and Wilson J. Warren, *Teaching History in the Digital Classroom* (New York: M.E. Sharpe, 2002).
4. American Historical Association, "Statement on Excellent Classroom Teaching of History," <<http://www.historians.org/teaching/policy/ExcellentTeaching.htm>>.
5. Patrick Read, "What Happened and Why? Helping Students Read and Write Like Historians," *The History Teacher* 39, no. 1 (November 2005): 23-32.
6. Sara Brooks Sundberg, "An Investigation of the Effects of Exam Essay Questions on Student Learning in United States History Survey Courses," *The History Teacher* 40, no. 1 (November 2006): 59-68.
7. Stephen Robertson, "What's Wrong with Online Readings? Text, Hypertext, and the History Web," *The History Teacher* 39, no. 4 (August 2006): 441-454.

## Appendix: Selections from JSTOR Assignment Worksheet

### JSTOR Assignment Worksheet

#### JSTOR Directions

6. You're now in JSTOR. You'll see a search box, and just above it you will see three options: Basic Search, Advanced Search, Article Locator. **Click on Advanced Search.**
7. There are two boxes you need to check: under Limit To, **click the "Article" box.** That way you'll only get articles, not book reviews or editorials. Scroll further down, and **click the "History" box.** That way you'll only be searching through academic journals about history. **If your first search fails to turn up what you want, and you go back for a new search, make sure the two boxes remain checked.**
8. Now, do a search the way you'd do a Google search on whatever topic you wish, as long as it might produce results for events from before the year 1600 C.E. For instance, you might try "Women in China" or "Ancient Warfare" or "Joan of Arc" or "Slave Rebellion" or "Sexuality" or "early Christianity" or anything else in world history up to 1600-ish. Tip: Don't make your search terms too specific. Start broadly.
9. You're going to need some patience as you sift through the results that come back. Some will have very little in common with what you thought you were getting, others will be written in a manner more complex than what is appropriate for this class. You might wind up with an article about a topic quite different from what you started out thinking about. That is part of why I'm asking you to do this, in order to begin to see what's out there, you have to sift through stuff!
10. Once you've found a workable article, by reading through part of it online, **click the "Print" button** on the top left, and print out a copy of your article, **including the title page that comes with it.** Congratulations, you've successfully used JSTOR to do research.

#### Content Questions

Addressing these questions helps you demonstrate that you have read and comprehended your paper, and that you can summarize it effectively. Analysis

and criticism are great, but it will not make any sense to me if you haven't first clearly explained to me what the article was about.

- What is the topic of this historian's article?
- What is the author's main argument or point?
- What sources of historical evidence does the author use? (old books and letters and diaries? physical artifacts like tools and buildings and works of art and weapons? legal records?)
- How does the author use her or his evidence to support the main argument?
- Does the author of the article discuss what other historians have said about this topic? If so, where does this author agree or disagree with the other historians?

### **Analytical Questions**

These are questions that show that not only can you comprehend and summarize the article, you can also thoughtfully consider its strengths and weaknesses. You will not receive a grade higher than a low C if you do not demonstrate an ability to give substantive thought to these questions.

- Has the author clearly made an argument about what happened in the past concerning a specific topic or set of topics, why it happened, and why it is important?
- How bold is the author's argument? Is it more modest or more grandiose? In your opinion, how well has the author proven his or her point?

Hint: Oftentimes, students will complain that the author is not making moral judgments or recommendations; that the author is not flat-out saying, for example, "I think we should not have fought in Vietnam." But that is not the sort of argument historians get paid to make! Instead, they try to argue about what happened, why it happened, and how we should understand the meaning of it. Those are the sorts of arguments you want to look for and to evaluate.

- Are there any limitations or difficulties with the evidence and how the author uses it?

- A good historian raises new questions about old topics. Does this article suggest any new questions or issues to you? Does this article fit with or contradict the themes and lessons from class?
- Is the article well-organized and easy to follow? What could make for improvements?  

If you say “it was too long” or “it was too short,” can you suggest particular things that should be removed or added?
- Overall, what do you think of the article?